



Care for Persons, Care for Planet

By DANIEL R. DILEO, MTS

Upon his election as pope in 2013, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ, became the first pontiff to take the name Francis, in honor of St. Francis of Assisi. Since then, the pope has embodied the charism of the saint by paying particular and consistent attention to care of people, care of the environment and the dynamic interrelatedness between them.

Pope Francis’ emphasis on care of both persons and planet is an invitation to the general Catholic Church for deeper ecological reflection. It is especially so for Catholic health care, rooted in the ministry’s mission to care for all of creation, its experience serving those harmed by environmental degradation and its capacity to address environmental challenges. The leadership of Pope Francis thus invites the ministry to consider even more deeply the ways in which it might live its vocation to care for the health and wellness of people and the rest of creation.

ENVIRONMENTAL VISION

There are at least four points that serve as pillars of Pope Francis’ ecological vision:

- The recognition and affirmation of the goodness of all creation
- Humanity’s unique place in creation
- The fact that environmental degradation harms people, especially the poor and vulnerable
- Humanity’s responsibility to steward God’s gift of creation

Although Pope Francis has expressed each of these points in his unique style, it is important to remember that he has, in many ways, built on the environmental legacies of his two immedi-

ate predecessors. Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI did much to develop and advance Catholic ecological awareness, especially the concepts they called human ecology and natural ecology.

Similarly, Pope Francis recognizes that all creation is good. In a 2014 general audience, Francis recalled that “the first chapter of Genesis, at the very beginning of the Bible, shows us that God delights of His creation, by repeatedly emphasizing the beauty and goodness of all things. At the end of each day, it is written: ‘God saw that it was good.’”

“If God sees that creation is something good and beautiful,” the pope continued, “we too must have this attitude, we must see that creation is something good and beautiful.”¹

The traditional Christian recognition that humanity is both a part of and at the apex of creation also is a characteristic of Pope Francis’ environmental vision. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, for example, Francis said all persons “are God’s handiwork, his creation” embedded in and part of the natural world. In his May 21, 2014, general audience, the pope added, “in the eyes of God we [humans] are the most beautiful thing, the greatest, the best of creation. ... The gift of knowledge



sets us in profound harmony with the Creator and allows us to participate in the clarity of his vision and his judgment.”²

Because people are embedded within creation, Pope Francis recognizes that they are harmed when the environment is harmed. He has observed that “thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement,”³ and he has lamented the “many wounds [that] are inflicted upon humanity” due to “our failures in love and respect towards ... the whole of creation.”⁴

Also, the pope’s environmental vision includes commitment to responsible ecological stewardship: “the Christian view of creation includes a positive judgment about the legitimacy of interventions on nature if these are meant to be beneficial and are performed responsibly ...”⁵

However, Francis cautions that this use must be balanced by a commitment to “cultivate and care for” creation, as Genesis 2:15 says.

“Creation is not a property, which we can rule over at will; or, even less, is the property of only a few,” the pope said.⁶ And although creation can be understood as being at our disposition, this does not justify the ways that humans are “driven by greed and by the arrogance of dominion, possession, manipulation and exploitation” of nature. Rather, the proper use and stewardship of God’s

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gift of creation is “by acknowledging the ‘grammar’ inscribed in nature and by wisely using resources for the benefit of all, with respect for the beauty, finality and usefulness of every living being and its place in the ecosystem.”⁷

Humans must respect creation and “consider it a gracious gift which we must care for and set at the service of our brothers and sisters, including future generations,” he said.⁸ “I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibil-

ity in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be ‘protectors’ of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.”⁹

ADVOCACY

Given the scope and scale of the Catholic health care ministry, Pope Francis’ ecological vision is an invitation for Catholic health care to reflect more deeply on how it understands and interacts with all creation. Because environmental concerns can affect population health — air pollution can trigger asthma, for example, or a chemical spill can make it unsafe to drink from a town’s water supply — the ministry can look for and act on opportunities to make significant environmental advocacy contributions.

To put a human face on the often abstract notions of environmental harm, Catholic health care providers can share their experiences in treating victims of environmental degradation. Creating a publicity campaign around such testimony could help people and institutions more clearly recognize the connections between environmental sustainability and genuine human flourishing.

In addition, the Catholic health care ministry might use its health-related experience of environmental harm to advocate for public policies aimed at environmental stewardship. Recently, for example, the Catholic Health Association of the United States (CHA) publicly supported the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposal to regulate carbon emissions from existing power plants under the Clean Power Plan. In a statement, Sr. Carol Keehan, DC, CHA’s president and CEO, said the association supports carbon pollution rules based on the understanding that “climate change is contributing to heat-related illness, vector-borne disease such as malaria, and problems with food and water quality and security.”

Similarly, CHA supported the EPA’s 2012 Mercury and Air Toxics Standards based on the understanding of how mercury and other toxic air pollutants from power plants harm public health. In a statement, Sr. Keehan said CHA’s support for the standards was grounded “in the Catholic Church’s teachings on the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of human life —



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especially in regards to the poor and vulnerable who disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental degradation.”

STEWARDSHIP

In view of the many ways in which the health care sector can contribute to a more environmentally sustainable society, Pope Francis' deliberations on the connections between the human environment and the natural environment provide the impetus for Catholic health care to examine even more deeply its own practices of environmental stewardship.

In its document *Climate Change and Health: Is There a Role for the Health Care Sector?* CHA quotes the Department of Energy's report that “hospitals and health care facilities are the second most energy intensive building sector in the U.S. [after retail food services], consuming in excess of 8 percent of U.S. annual energy consumption.”¹⁰ In addition, the health care sector uses large quantities of disposable products, sizable quantities of water and serves a substantial amount of food to patients and visitors.

Catholic health care might use Pope Francis' ecological concerns to ask pointed questions:

- Is the Catholic health care ministry balancing the best medical practices with the most effective environmental ones?

- Are there particular opportunities for a system, hospital or other facility to reduce energy consumption?

- Can ministry leaders identify specific occasions to reduce waste, increase recycling and make more locally sourced purchases?

Examining such questions will help Catholic health care leaders begin to identify concrete steps for lifting up and strengthening the ministry's commitment to environmental sustainability; voicing its unique experience with the health impacts of ecological degradation; reflecting on the environmental sustainability of its own ministry; and discerning ways in which it might better care for God's gift of creation.

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RESOURCES

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NOTES

1. Francis, general audience, May 14, 2014.
2. Francis, general audience, May 21, 2014.
3. General audience, May 21, 2014.
4. Francis, homily for World Youth Day, March 22, 2014.
5. Francis, 2014 World Day of Peace message.
6. General audience, May 21, 2014.
7. 2014 World Day of Peace message.
8. 2014 World Day of Peace message.
9. Francis, homily, March 19, 2013.
10. Laura Anderko, Stephanie Chalupka and Brenda M. Afzal, *Climate Change and Health: Is There a Role for the Health Care Sector?* (St. Louis: The Catholic Health Association, 2012).

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